BUSINESS

THE INTERNSHIP

CASELET

Each year, Judy Green, a manager at a large management consulting firm, looked forward to supervising the summer interns. Her colleagues teased her about this—intern oversight was generally seen as a chore, something to be delegated if possible. “You know, you can unload that to someone more junior,” her friend and peer Steve reminded her more than once. But Judy genuinely enjoyed the work, even though it sometimes strained her ability to meet her other responsibilities. She had benefited immensely from kind and attentive mentors during business school and her early career, and she still considered that guidance one of her greatest professional advantages. Besides, the interns were usually eager to learn and motivated to impress, and they often produced remarkably strong work.

This summer, though, the program was not unfolding as smoothly as in past years. The internship was highly competitive: only three students were selected annually from a national pool. The positions provided a clear advantage in the job market, and the company had a strong record of hiring its top interns into full-time roles. In fact, in just a few weeks Judy would have to make the decision which of the interns the firm would extend a full-time offer to. Because of this, expectations were high—both from the company and from the interns themselves. The program’s rigor was part of its value. One of the interns, Eric Thompson, was falling behind in ways that Judy could no longer overlook. He arrived late to team check-ins, seemed withdrawn during discussions, and had already missed the first internal deadlines for two assignments. When she asked if everything was all right, he brushed the question aside, insisting he would “catch up.” But the gap only widened.

Both other interns were performing well, and Judy expected to extend them offers. It still was not out of the question that Eric could be given an offer as well, but his performance needed to change very quickly in order for that to happen. Finally, Judy scheduled a meeting to address the issues directly with Eric. She prepared to have a difficult but routine conversation. Instead, Eric surprised her. As soon as he sat down, he began apologizing—not defensively, but with a kind of exhausted sincerity. Then the rest poured out: he was under significant financial strain, working night shifts in addition to the internship, and trying to support several family members who depended on him. His relatives believed that because he was enrolled at an elite university and spending the summer at a prestigious company, he must already have access to money and opportunities. The pressure—financial, emotional, and cultural—had become overwhelming. He was barely sleeping. When the meeting ended, Judy sat for a moment with her notes, aware that the situation was more complicated than she had realized.

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Later that afternoon, she spoke with Steve, trying to sort through her own response. On the one hand, she felt instinctively sympathetic. Eric's circumstances were difficult in ways she had not experienced at his age, and despite his struggles she saw great potential within him. If he were given an offer, it seems very likely that his new income could go a long way towards helping with the background issues that were causing him to underperform. On the other hand, she worried about fairness. The other two interns were meeting the program's demanding expectations; offering special accommodations might undermine the integrity of the internship—and could place additional strain on the team, both now and in the future. And she wondered, too, what would actually help Eric in the long run. If the internship was too demanding given his circumstances, would he really do better in a full-time role? Was leniency really in his best interest, or would a different opportunity ultimately serve him better?

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